

Alexander Merow

A Hard Decision

Short Story

www.alexander-merow.de.tl

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The landing ship quaked and Nithard Rankenwald held his breath once more. Icy storms had gripped the aircraft, shaking it like a furious frost giant. Then the landing ship started to dive into the maelstrom of snowflakes that was raging in the cold darkness above the pole.

“Calm down, Rankenwald! The Dark Legion is much more dangerous than a cold gust”, said leutnant von Waldfurth with some kind of fatherly smile. He laid his hand on the shoulder of the young soldier who stood beside him.

Nithard exhaled while a red lamp above his head began to light up. A minute later the transporter had landed somewhere in the ice desert.

Von Waldfurth examined the fifty Bauhaus soldiers who were waiting in full get-up in front of a giant steel hatch. Nithard Rankenwald put on his hussar helmet with the characteristic pickel on its top. The pale young face of the soldier disappeared behind a face mask just like his fair hair.

Nithard held his breath again, he felt the adrenaline painfully rushing through his veins; Rankenwald`s heart began to pound faster, his guts cramped.

“Are you allright?”, he heard the dull voice of leutnant von Waldfurth behind his back.

“Yes...yes, Sir! I`m fine!”, answered Nithard, trying to suppress a panic attack.

In the eyes of the older soldiers he was some kind of hero. They all showed him a lot respect after that bloody skirmish in the Venusian jungle. But in these seconds

Nithard didn't feel all too brave. To the contrary, something deep in his mind tried to warn him of setting foot in the cold darkness outside the landing ship.

The hatch opened with a loud rumble; snowflakes whirled into the hall where the Bauhaus troopers had gathered.

Rankenwald turned his head to the right and spotted a tall man in a white armor. The stranger had positioned himself next to leutnant von Waldfurth. With blank face he stared into the icy darkness beyond the open steel hatch. Then he put his helmet on.

"They don't know that we are coming! Let's do this quickly!", shouted the man in the white armor towards the hussars who immediately began to move. Again Nithard felt von Waldfurth's hand on his pauldron.

"We will soon be back here, boy! Don't worry! Just follow me!"

Nithard started running and finally jumped out of the landing ship into the snow. A few meters ahead he recognized the tall man in the white armor driving the soldiers forward. Nithard didn't know who the stranger was and why he accompanied the hussars and rangers although he could imagine that he was a high rank cleric from the Brotherhood.

While Rankenwald struggled through the knee-deep snow he remembered his first and only fight in the ranks of the Bauhaus soldiers. Meanwhile, it was four months ago, that patrol mission which had finally ended in a slaughter. Four long months since Carl had died in his arms.

One year ago, Nithard and his younger brother had both volunteered for the Bauhaus army in hope of a better life under the banners of the corporate forces. "Being a soldier is so much better than spending a life as a worker

in one of the factories in the outskirts of Heimburg", they had told him back in school.

His father had been so proud of his sons when they joined the army to fight for the protection of humanity and the glory of Bauhaus. Only his mother had not been pleased to see their two sons become soldiers in a never ending war.

Nonetheless, corporate citizens of lower heritage could rise in the Bauhaus society by making career the army. Or they just died young somewhere in the muddy trenches.

A group of five juggernauts stamped past Rankenwald through the snow; they looked like grey war elephants in their heavy suits. For a moment, the young soldier was absorbed in thought. Once more he saw his brother's face in his mind's eye. Carl had been mauled by a creature the Bauhaus officers called "Praetorian Stalker". In reverse, Nithard had killed the monster after he had fallen into a state of psychotic rage. Not only it, even one more of its kind. And three so called "Undead Legionaries" and not less than eight heretics.

Ever after the older soldiers showed him a lot respect. Nithard had gone into the jungle as cannon fodder to return as a hero with an iron cross on the chest - but all that didn't bring Carl back.

"There will never be a real chance to defeat the Dark Legion. We can just drive them back again and again. This malicious force will always be a part of the Solar System. Our world has been infected and there is no cure – only procrastination", said the veterans who had already seen lots of battlefields.

So Carl had died in vain in a war that was already lost, Nithard thought sometimes. This was a shattering realization, a bitter truth that had suffocated all the nascent heroism in Rankenwald's heart.

After the soldiers had covered about one mile they reached a group of snow-clad hills that rose out of the icy desert. Von Waldfurth waved his hand, the hussars, rangers and juggernauts stopped.

"Okay, the research facility is about three hundred meters behind these rocks. We will go in and capture every person we can get. But we must strike fast...", it resounded out of the little earpiece in Nithard's helmet until the Bauhaus officer was interrupted by the cleric.

"No, I'm the leader of this operation and not you, leutnant von Waldfurth. I have already told you that your order is to eliminate everyone in this facility. The Brotherhood will mind for the rest."

"But you said that we are here to capture...", the officer tried to counter.

"No, I have never said anything like that. Your squad is the fist in this mission - but I am the brain. Everything I tell you has been coordinated with the Bauhaus group management and the leaders of the Brotherhood. Now do what I say, leutnant!"

Several minutes passed in silence. The troopers stood like statues in the cold darkness, stock-still and confused. Nonetheless, they had to follow the orders of the white armored man.

"Well, then...", leutnant von Waldfurth muttered through the radio network to finally start advancing towards the hills. Nithard and the other soldiers vanished in the cold polar night.

When they had passed the group of rocks they recognized a dome-like structure; white like the snow in this frosty wasteland and the armor of the cleric who had just ordered them to kill everyone they would meet.

Slowly the hussars advanced, Nithard considered the white cupola which looked abandoned like the last relict of a lost civilization. Not a single light shined in the distance, there was nothing but the eerie looking building, the howling wind and the dancing snow flakes. Rankenwald's hussar armour held back the deadly coldness of the polar night. However, the young soldier was still freezing. He clenched his panzerknacker rifle and felt several times for his combat knife and his ammunition. The more time passed, the more Nithard was tortured by a growing tension.

After a while the dark dome was hardly hundred meters away from the Bauhaus soldiers who were waiting in the cold night. Leutnant von Waldfurth made a sign, the squad stopped.

Rankenwald recognized several small entrance doors around the building. He considered his weapon for a second, then he stared warily up to the top of the dome. "They don't know that we're coming...", he said scarcely audible to himself.

A blink later a wave of bright light caught the Bauhaus soldiers and the cleric who started to scream with a mixture of confusion and wrath. Nithard suddenly stood in the centre of a giant light cone. He immediately slipped to the ground while all hell broke loose around him.

Two Hussars were rushed off their feet by a blaze of gunfire coming out of the dome. Several explosions followed, Nithard saw a helmet flying in his direction; the

bloodspattered headgear landed right next to him in the snow.

“Take cover! Down! Down!”, shouted von Waldfurth at the top of his lungs. His voice was so loud that it cut deeply into Rankenwald’s ears.

Two dozen of strange looking soldiers poured out of an entrance door in the centre of the building which was brightly illuminated now. Nithard crept a few meters through the snow, aimed and opened fire.

“They don’t expect us, right? What do you say now, inquisitor?”, screamed von Waldfurth through the voice network but he got no answer.

Nithard saw the tall cleric waving his hands around, he yelled something the young soliders could not understand in the deafening chaos.

Meanwhile even more enemy soldiers had left the dome. They welcomed the attackers with a storm of machine-gun and plasma fire. Desperately Rankenwald shot back. He killed one of the strangers with a lucky hit in the head, three of the other soldiers turned into living torches. They screeched in pain while they staggered towards the dome’s wall.

Nithard had never seen anything like that. He guessed that the cleric had used one of his mysterious powers. But his help seemed not to be enough. More and more enemies came out of the building. The first group of them had been some strange looking humans, now the second wave started its counterattack on the Bauhaus forces.

“Robots!”

In his childhood Nithard had heard a few stories about the cybertronic megacorporation which was hiding in the darkest corners of the Solar System. Indeed, he had

never imagined to fight against some of their scary creations one day.

Several robots carrying big machine guns, marched through the ice and opened fire. Nithard pressed his face mask into the snow while a hurricane of bullets ripped the bodies of his comrades apart. Blood splatters covered the white ground, the robots came nearer, cutting a swath through the lines of their enemies.

Nithard reloaded, he emptied a whole magazine trying to hold the robot soldiers back. Simultaneously the juggernauts concentrated their fire on the attackers. They stormed forward and threw themselves on the robots, smashing them to the ground with their powered fists. Sparks flew around when the heavily armored hulks tore them to pieces.

Nithard exhaled, he reloaded his panzerknacker again, peering in the direction of the dome only to see that the fight was far from being over. Even more enemies had gathered around the building. Humans with gray armor plates on their bodies, furthermore some big metallic creatures who were towering over them.

Suddenly, Nithard saw leutnant von Waldfurth crawling towards him; the veteran pointed at the group of enemies and growled a curse.

“Sorry, Rankenwald, I didn’t expect something like that. This damn cleric has given us false information. To hell with him!”, he fulminated.

Before Nithard could give him a reply, the ground was shaken by an explosion. Rockets and grenades rained from the dark sky, some hussars and rangers were hit and mangled. When Rankenwald turned around in panic he saw the leutnant being thrown to the ground by a huge blast wave.

“We will all die if we remain at this place! There is no cover, we are on show! The only way is to get into that building! All or nothing! Attack!”, screamed the cleric and charged forward.

For better or for worse, Rankenwald had to admit that he was right. About twenty Bauhaus soldiers were already dead while the rest of the squad would soon follow if they poised cowering in the snow.

Nithard try to blank out all thoughts and started to run. He followed the juggernauts who tried to pin down the cybertronic warriors in front of the dome. Death cries echoed through the night but Rankenwald didn't stop running. There was no escape in this godforsaken ice desert, the flight forward was all that had been left.

Finally he tore his combat knife out of the sheath, jumping at the first enemy in his way like a wild animal. It was a chasseur, an ordinary footsoldier of the Cybertronic corporation, with a strange looking rifle in his hands. Before he could point his weapon at Rankenwald a sharp blade cut his throat. The cyborg stared at Nithard with empty eyes, more confused than scared because of the deadly wound. With brute force Nithard pushed him back and threw him into the snow.

Around the young soldier who fought for his life with courage born of despair the other Bauhaus troopers dashed into the ranks of the defenders. Cyborgs, robots and hussars attacked each other with rifles, knives and even bare hands.

Although he was only thinking for the next moment in order to survive this blood insanity, Nithard realized that they were losing the battle. Three juggernauts, their best soldiers, had already been killed while the number of enemies was still growing.

Another chasseur headed directly towards Rankenwald, trying to shoot him down. Nithard reflexively jumped aside and the deadly burst hit one of his comrades in the back. Before the cyborg could target him again, Rankenwald answered with his panzerknacker. He riddled the Chasseur with bullets but the transhuman creature didn't go down.

"What the hell are you?", yelled Nithard into the snowstorm while the Chasseur unwaveringly came closer.

The cyborg slowly raised his weapon but this time Rankenwald got some unexpected help. In the meantime, leutnant von Waldfurth had taken a MG-40 LMG from a dead hussar, he shouted something in the direction of his young comrade and finally opened fire. Rankenwald saw the Cybertronic soldier's head burst like an overripe melon.

"Don't mention it, boy!" Nithard heard von Waldfurth laugh under his face shield.

Several enemies were since killed by the cleric who had used more of his magic. Obviously he was much more powerful than any of the hussars had thought in the beginning. The white armored warrior of the Brotherhood burned the cyborgs alive or slaughtered them with a huge sword. However, he seemed not to care if the hussars around him lived or died.

Nithard and leutnant von Waldfurth took cover behind some containers which stood in front of the dome-like facility, driving another wave of cyborgs back into the building. Then the Bauhaus officer opened his face mask; Rankenwald did the same. For a few seconds both men gazed at each other without saying a word.

“We have lost most of our men. This damn cleric has just used us like puppets”, hissed von Waldfurth.

“Then tell me what is the sense of this mission? What shall we do here in this ice wasteland?”

“I don’t know, Rankenwald. They haven’t given me many informations. They just told me that it will be an easy and harmless operation.”

“Harmless operation...”, repeated Nithard twisting his mouth.

Von Waldfurth had no chance to answer his younger comrade. Instead he stared at a big shadow coming out of the snowy night beyond the facility building. Open-mouthed the officer pointed at the thing that had almost reached the edge of a light cone.

“Attila!”

It was the only word the leutnant could find at that point. Meanwhile, Nithard used his last magazine to load his weapon while a huge skeleton-like warmachine started its furious assault on the last Bauhaus soldiers.

The roar of the big gatling gun the Attila robot was carrying in his steel hands drowned even the howling of the merciless iceshadow. Screaming Rankenwald curled up into a ball behind the container, hoping that the robot thing would overlook him.

One by one the hussars were mowed down by the tempest the Attila had unleashed. Before the last juggernauts could react they were also hit by countless high speed bullets. Their heavily armored bodies were rent; steel plates and bloody guts flew around.

Then the techno-behemoth, one of the terror weapons of the Cybertronic corporation, turned his skeleton head in all directions. Still lying behind the container, Nithard was praying for his life. He heard the Attila walk around. The

robot had stopped shooting, apparently it had killed all the remaining Bauhaus soldiers.

“This is the end...”, was the only thought left in Rankenwald’s mind.

After several minutes had passed Nithard dared to peek to the side to see what had happened to von Waldfurth. The officer lay face down in a pool of blood. Some bullets had completely perforated the container behind which von Waldfurth had looked for shelter.

“You can’t stop me, unholy machine!”, Nithard suddenly heard from somewhere beyond the entrance door.

Carefully and with hammering heart he peeked past the edge of the container to see the cleric attacking the robot. The clunky steel monster turned around to face the last invader but the warrior in the white armor was too agile for it. One, two, three blowes hit the legs of the Attila, the glowing sword of the cleric cut through steel and cable harnesses. At once the robot began to stumble backwards. Vainly the thing tried to use its machine gun when the cleric rammed his sword through steel sheathings to finally hit the machine’s core. While the Attila was still trying to grab the attacker who was almost dancing around its legs it suddenly froze like a block of ice.

The warrior of the Brotherhood jumped away from the giant walker and the soulless eyes of the machine gazed into space one last time. A second later it burst in a loud explosion.

“Holy Durand, I’m still alive!”, whispered Nithard to himself. Then he left his cover, stepping up to the cleric.

“Ah, there is still one hussar left”, said the white armored man.

“Yes, Sir...your holiness”, stammered Nithard dazedly. “Very well! Then follow me into the facility!”, answered the cleric whose voice resounded hollowly behind his face mask.

Rankenwald and the inquisitor advanced into the research facility. A group of five chasseurs tried to stop them but the cyborgs died by the cleric's glowing blade. However, the last survivor of the Bauhaus squad was still paralyzed. All his comrades were dead. Even leutnant von Waldfurth who had always been a kindhearted superior.

Hurrying through rooms and corridors with unnatural speed, the cleric finally reached a hall full of containers and barrels. Rankenwald just followed him without asking questions. The two intruders encountered a group of men and women in white coats who started to scream in panic after spotting the inquisitor.

“Execute them, soldier!”, shouted the man from the Brotherhood and Nithard did not dare to object.

He raised his panzerknacker and opened fire on the moribund scientists. Meanwhile, the cleric had already left the warehouse to enter another part of the facility. Nithard followed him like a obedient dog, killing every person he met in the corridors.

After a while, the inquisitor had reached his final goal. An impressive laboratory behind a big front of armored glass. “You shall better open that door! I promise that you will not suffer, Gothland! And I promise that your soul will be purged in the name of the Brotherhood!”, called the cleric. It didn't take long till the laboratory door opened. Nithard followed the inquisitor in order to enter a room full of giant computers and bright screens on the walls.

A man with a pale, sunken face and a grey coil of hair stood behind a surgical table with a monstrous creature on it.

“How did you find this place?”, asked the stranger with a sign of deep disappointment in his face.

Eventually the cleric took off his helmet to let Nithard see a wrinkled face with cold blue eyes. He turned his head to him for a second, then he beheld the scientist again.

“You ask how we have found your facility here at the pole? Well, the church has its eyes and ears in every corporation, Dr. Gothland.”

The scientist smiled with all cynicism a face could express. “Killing everyone in the building: Is that your understanding of religion, inquisitor Cheraux?”

“What you do here is nothing but pure blasphemy! The Cybertronic corporation has become a cancer that must be cauterized.”

“All your ignorance makes you blind, Cheraux. We have found out things that could help our species to survive”, replied the man, the cleric had called “Dr. Gothland”.

The corners of the inquisitor’s mouth turned upwards in a split second. “Ridiculous! Experiments with these things are heresy! An insult of what mankind stands for!”

Cheraux pointed at the monstrous humanoid on the surgical table.

“Since centuries mankind stands for decay and backwardness”, countered the scientist with defiance in his expression.

Suddenly the researcher came out from behind the surgical table, he smoothed down his coat to lift his hands afterwards; Rankenwald targeted the back of the man’s head with his rifle.

“It is too late to beg me for mercy, Dr. Gothland. Far too late!”, said Cheraux straightfacedly.

“Your fanaticism is far too big to let you think clearly”, riposted the scientist who seemed to have already settled his affairs.

“Where is the thing I’m looking for? Give it to me and I promise you a quick death despite the life of blasphemy you have lived.”

Dr. Gothland fished something out of his pocket. A black pyramid-shaped object with the size of a human fist.

“The absorber!” The inquisitor arched his eyebrows.

“What will you do with it? The Brotherhood hasn’t the knowledge to handle it. I’m the creator of this technological wonder and I’m the only one who can use it.”

“You will not use anything because your life ends here.” Hastily the cleric gripped the black pyramid, he regarded it with a satisfied smile.

“What is this thing?”, Nithard suddenly asked.

The gray haired scientist turned his head, looked at him and answered: “The absorber is my creation. It is a new weapon that is able to destroy the demonic powers of the Dark Legion in a radius of several miles. I have spent most of my life inventing this thing. Maybe my technology could end the war against the Legion in favour of mankind one day.”

“Hold your tongue, soldier! Who has given you the permission to ask questions like this?”, spat the inquisitor, staring at Rankenwald.

Again he held the black pyramid high like a trophy; whispering something to himself that Nithard could not understand. Gazing in abstraction the cleric poised for a moment.

“If you destroy my invention and burn down all the knowledge in this facility you could harm the human species like no man before. One day we can not only destroy the Dark Legion in the Solar System but even revive the art of interstellar space travel. Please think about...”, said Dr. Gothland.

“One your knees, heretic!”, was Cheraux` reply, he pointed at the ground in front of him.

Without saying a further word the old scientist sank down; Nithard saw a tear running down his pale cheek.

“Deliver him from his sins!”, called the inquisitor in Rankenwald`s direction. Nithard aimed, he clenched his teeth and shot.

“What have you done, soldier?” Dr. Gothland opened his eyes, speechlessly staring at the young Bauhaus hussar with the rifle in his hands.

Nithard slowly went to the dead cleric, picked up the absorber and thrust it into the scientist`s hand.

“Go! Leave this facility, old man! You must survive!”, said Nithard to take off his helmet in the next moment. The researcher with the grey coil of hair nodded.

“Thank you, my friend!”, he answered then with a grateful smile.

“I hope mankind can thank you too someday”, remarked Rankenwald thoughtfully.